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ABSTRACT

Developing oral language skills, although an essential element in the California English-Language Arts Framework (1987), is often neglected due to the current emphasis on reading and writing. Creative drama is a vehicle for integrating oral language, cultural literacy and creative expression elements from the state frameworks for the development of literacy in all students. Educators agree that creative drama is a motivating and meaningful medium for connecting today's students to content and understanding often beyond the realm of their previous experience or knowledge. Research in creative drama is inconclusive at best. Articles abound with success stories relating to student enthusiasm and subsequent progress. There does not seem to be a strong opposition to the idea of creative drama, with most agreeing on the benefits of active participation, social interaction, and critical thinking. Educators caution, however, that teacher guidance on the process is critical for maintaining focus and boundaries. Creative drama, unlike other oral language processes such as Reader's Theatre and choral reading, allows emergent or non-English speakers to participate at a level comfortable to them. Creative drama is one of many methods that can develop literacy for all students. All administrators and district office personnel seriously concerned about literacy for children should focus on the importance of meaningful student learning through strategies like creative drama. More research needs to be done in the area of creative drama, either in support of, or in opposition to its practice. Educators need guidance in implementing new strategies, and there is little data to support what could be a effective process. (Contains 27 references.) (RS)

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CRACKING THE CODE

LITERACY THROUGH CREATIVE DRAMA

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Introduction

Whole language? Phonics? Bilingual education? Unfortunately there are more questions in education today than answers. American educators are challenged with an ever-changing diverse population that requires one basic element for success in their lives, within and outside of the academic setting---literacy.

As a teacher in a culturally diverse, low socioeconomic area, I am continually implementing strategies that may enable students to develop literacy at age- and grade-appropriate levels. Aware that my students often lack language and experiences upon which to build new knowledge, much time is spent in multidisciplinary approaches to reading and writing. Oral language, however, is often limited to choral reading, scripted plays, and formal oral reports. While investigating oral language activities, I became intrigued with the process of creative drama, a subject around which this paper evolved.

Developing oral language skills, although an essential element in the California English-Language Arts Framework (1987), is often neglected due to the current emphasis on reading and writing. I hope to encourage implementation of more oral language activities such as creative drama, by showing the benefits motivated students can receive: comprehension and appreciation of text leading to further reading, development of meaningful language, and social

growth due to self-confidence and heightened self-awareness.

I see in creative drama a vehicle for integrating the Oral Language (English-Language Arts), Cultural Literacy (History, Social-Science), and Creative Expression (Visual and Performing Arts) elements from the state frameworks for the development of literacy in all students.

Statement of the Problem

Teaching children to listen, speak, read, and write with proficiency has become a major challenge to educators, especially in states like California, where students for whom English is a second language often make up the majority of a school's population. The use of drama and other oral language activities is often considered worthwhile, but not an essential component of a language arts program.

Educators have focused on the importance of using a variety of teaching strategies such as cooperative learning, peer-tutoring, and guided reading, with a number of supportive methods (English Language Development, sheltered English) to meet individual student needs. What is often missing from many programs is student motivation to learn, due to the lack of personal connection to the material being presented.

How can the implementation of methods such as creative drama improve student literacy? In an attempt to answer this question, there are several fundamental questions that need to be addressed.

- What is creative drama?
- How can creative drama be used in the

classroom to promote literacy?

- Why should educators stress oral language, especially in culturally diverse classrooms?
- Do studies support creative drama?

Answering these questions should help us understand the importance of creative drama and other oral language strategies as tools for creating a truly literate student population.

Definitions

Choral reading- reading or reciting in unison under the direction of a leader. (McCaslin, 1996)

Creative drama- an improvisational, nonexhibitional process-centered form of drama in which participants are guided by a leader to imagine, enact, and reflect upon human experiences. (McCaslin, 1996)

Dramatic play- the free play of very young children in which they explore their universe, imitating the actions and character traits of those around them. (McCaslin, 1996)

Emergent literacy- children's process of developing awareness and control of written language. It particularly includes the exploration of written language that occurs before children begin reading conventionally. (Davidson, 1996)

Improvisation- the creation of a situation in which characters speak spontaneously. (McCaslin, 1996)

Pretend play- dramatic play.

Readers Theater- a presentational art where two or more oral interpreters employ vocal and physical suggestions to make all kinds of literature live vividly in the audience's imagination rather than literally on stage.

(Tanner, 1987)

Transmediation- a process of moving information from one communication system to another. (Hoyt, 1992)

History of the Topic

Drama in education evolved from the Romantic view, begun in the early part of this century, that children should be valued for their uniqueness, with the teacher nurturing and encouraging natural development. In opposition was the accepted traditional view that teachers transmitted external knowledge to children, with an emphasis on behavior modification.

The New Education movement near the turn of the century included "learning by doing" and "activity method", opening the door for drama in the classroom. This movement contradicted the accepted Puritan belief that children should study, not play, in order to develop into productive adults (Bolton, 1984).

Although much of the history related to drama in the classroom has come from England and Canada, where most of the practices began, educators in the United States followed the general trends. In the first part of this century, a small group of educators believed that an elementary school curriculum should be "emergent", developing from the needs of the children. Progressivists advocated drama in schools with very little concern as to standards for content or process (Stewig & Buege, 1994).

In 1921, American educator John Dewey attempted to reconcile the "progressive" and "traditional" views on

education by stating that activity in the classroom was a positive element but needed **purpose**, and that education should not be child-centered, but **learning-centered**. Drama in education, however, continued to be controversial, much of the problem lying with the manner in which progressives portrayed the process: child-centered, unrelated to content, and lacking performance standards.

Among early British pioneers with different approaches were **Harriet Finlay-Johnson** and **Caldwell Cook**, the former introducing dramatic methods of teaching content in curricular areas, and the latter emphasizing the importance of drama in teaching English. Their innovations were considered revolutionary, each in his/her own way.

In the United States, several pioneers in creative drama appeared in the Midwest: **Col. Francis W. Parker** urged simple improvised activities to emphasize the significance of oral expression at his school in Chicago, **William Wirt** placed the importance of integrating oral communication into the curriculum by developing the use of school auditoriums in Gary, and **Winifred Ward** was among the first educators to use creative dramatics with literature, in Evanston schools. (Siks & Dunnington, 1961)

In the 1920's and 1930's, drama had begun to take on popularity as a methodology for speech improvement. Although still considered progressive, proponents of drama as a vehicle for oration and elocution became adversaries for an even more controversial application of the medium,

Child Drama, introduced by Peter Slade. In **Child Drama**, after being given a situation in which to act, the child again became the center of focus, becoming: 1) completely absorbed in the activity (no audience) and 2) completely sincere in the playing of a part (Bolton, 1984).

The one name that appears in all texts on drama in education is Dorothy Heathcote, who used what she called **creative drama** in an effort to help students find universal truths about the human condition. In the 1960's and 1970's Heathcote taught that role-playing in an improvisational setting forced students to face and solve problems, internalizing the experience through its connection to their own lives (Wagner, 1976).

In this paper I hope to explore the potential of creative drama as a tool for reaching literacy, specifically but not exclusively, in culturally and socioeconomically diverse classrooms. If learning can be made meaningful and relevant to students' lives, perhaps they can be motivated to reach higher levels of literacy.

Major Issues/Answers to Questions

With literacy currently a pressing issue across the country, educators are implementing a myriad of strategies to reach our culturally and socioeconomically diverse, and often unmotivated students. Creative drama, unlike other oral language processes such as Readers Theater and choral reading, allows emergent or non-English speakers to participate at a level comfortable to them.

What is creative drama? "Creative drama is an improvisational, non-exhibitional process-centered form of drama in which participants are guided by a leader to imagine, enact, and reflect upon the human experience" (McCaslin, 1996). Although literacy is not the main goal of creative drama, it is often a by-product once students are motivated.

According to McCaslin (1996), creative drama in the classroom is improvisational in nature and can be based on literature, history, or any curricular area that lends itself to dramatization. Dialogue is always improvised, whether created from an original work or a well known story. Scenes are not repeated for rehearsal but for deepening participant understanding of universal themes and related values

Creative drama is complex, yet rewarding in its multiple benefits. Externally, there is improvement in

motor skills (action), memory skills (sequence), and imagination skills (imitation). Internally, a child gains self-awareness (feeling what the character might feel), values (general attitudes about the character or situation), and social skills (problem solving, negotiation) (Bolton, 1986).

How can creative drama be used in the classroom to promote literacy? Educators may be hesitant to implement creative drama in classrooms due to its open-ended, improvisational style. Constructivist in theory, it acknowledges that children construct their own knowledge in their own way, taking some of the control and input away from the teacher. If planned carefully, however, creative drama can cultivate the children's command of the process, reaping benefits for all.

Starting with simple activities such as listening to music and examining artwork teaches students to be attentive and alert to auditory and visual cues. Participating in pantomime allows for the practice of body movement without the interruption of speech. Students who have limited English proficiency can easily involve themselves in these activities, which will become familiar and less threatening when dialogue is added. Throughout the process the teacher guides the students, keeping the boundaries of behavior and creativity secure, building trust within the group (Cline & Ingerson, 1996).

Why should educators stress oral language, especially in culturally diverse classrooms?

In her book about English educator Dorothy Heathcote, Betty Wagner describes the importance of creative drama:

"If we think of any material stored in books as an unpalatable beef bouillon cube, to use Heathcote's metaphor, then some means must be found for releasing this dense mass into a savory broth of human experience. In educational circles this process has been called code cracking- breaking the code so the message can be read." (Wagner, 1976, p.187)

Heathcote feels that drama is a key to **cracking the code** of learning across the curriculum. She believes that through drama, and the application of personal experiences, one can translate text into meaningful learning of content, underlying themes, and human values.

Drama evokes higher order thinking, problem solving, feeling, and language. According to Hoyt (1992), **transmediation**, moving from one communication system to another, occurs as children move from body motion to verbal and written interpretation. Through a multiple communication system, students can internalize a connection between new learning and previous knowledge.

Because literature reflects the human condition, drama helps students to understand themselves better. As they spontaneously create dialogue, solve problems, and gain new knowledge, students internalize the feelings of the

characters in their particular situations—"walk in their shoes". The long term goals of drama education and literature are to help students understand themselves and the world in which they live (Miller, 1996).

Do studies support creative drama? There is a lack of significant research in the field of creative dramatics, but articles abound with success stories relating to student enthusiasm and subsequent progress. Although evidence is inconclusive, experts theorize that dramatic activity is critical in cognitive, social, and language development. Creative drama, a type of pretend play, can also be beneficial in developing concentration, creativity, listening and reading comprehension, cooperation, empathy, helpfulness, self-confidence, self-expression, and problem solving.

In a two-year study by the Arts Integration Program in 1992 (Betts, 1995), student attitudes about art, school, and themselves were analyzed through pre- and post-questionnaires, tests, journals, and interviews. The content objectives were in language arts, math, social studies, and history. Three of four fourth grade classes were given an arts integrated curriculum, and the fourth, the control group, was not. Data indicated no significant differences in achievement among the groups, however, attitudes toward school and themselves in the experimental groups were improved. There was also an increase in the use of cognitive and academic terms which showed the students' awareness of their own learning. Teachers reported that students in the arts integrated classes

increased in confidence and showed greater cohesiveness.

Basing their use of drama on a metaanalysis (Kardash and Wright, 1987) which showed a moderately positive effect upon student reading and oral and written communication, Beyersdorfer & Schauer (1993) had an eighth grade class collaborate in small groups to develop and perform mystery plays for their peers. The process involved discussions of setting, conflict, cause and effect, sequence, characterization, and related vocabulary, which led to meaningful revisions and clarification of content and process. Although this was not a scientific study, students were able to demonstrate their ability to use plot, story structure, etc., work cooperatively, and have fun in the process.

In a study done in Racine, Wisconsin (Stewig & Vail, 1985) on the integration of creative drama and language arts to promote oral language growth, results were inconclusive, as many of the variables such as student mobility, appropriateness of literature, teacher attitude, and classroom setting may have influenced outcomes. Significant oral language growth occurred in both groups, with neither group showing adverse effects of instruction.

SYNTHESIS AND ANALYSIS

The purpose of drama in education is to develop student thinking so that a common understanding of oneself and others can be reached. When integrated into academic content areas, such as history, social studies, and literature, students can learn by doing as Dewey prescribed.

Educators such as McCaslin, Bolton, Heathcote, and Stewig agree that creative drama is a motivating and meaningful medium for connecting today's students to content and understanding often beyond the realm of their previous experience or knowledge.

Research on creative drama is inconclusive at best. Studies done by Betts and Stewig & Vail are among many that show no significant difference in results when creative drama is or is not integrated into content. Results may be influenced by the very creative, fluid nature of drama itself,

There does not seem to be a strong opposition to the idea of creative drama, most agreeing on the benefits of active participation, social interaction, and critical thinking. All caution, however, that teacher guidance in the process is critical for maintaining focus and boundaries. Creative drama, unlike Readers Theater or historical drama, has a larger objective. The attempt to have students understand themselves and others may be

controversial in that it might be viewed as coercive or pressuring students into believing a particular way. I did not find articles that dealt with this issue.

CONCLUSIONS

After an extensive and exhaustive search for the meaning and applicability of creative drama, I've come to the conclusion that it is one of many methods that can develop literacy for all students. We know that role-playing, improvisation, and other types of acting have always been popular both with teachers and students. When adults are asked what they remember most fondly from school days, a performance of some type is always mentioned.

Integration into the content areas takes some careful planning, but implementing drama should not be more time-consuming in the classroom than a directed lesson with traditional seatwork.

How does creative drama fit into the state frameworks? According to the introduction to the **History-Social Science Framework**:

"...Students should realize that tragedies and triumphs have resulted from choices made by individuals...We want our students to understand how people in other times and places have grappled with fundamental questions of truth, justice, and personal responsibility and to ponder how we deal with the same issues today." (p.3)

In the strands of **Cultural Literacy**

and **Historical Literacy**, creative drama serves as a perfect vehicle for developing these universal themes.

In the **Developing Oral Language Skills** element of the **English-Language Arts Framework**, drama is again mentioned:

"...Classroom activities that enable students to become Huckleberry Finn or King Arthur in a dramatization, to interview Scarlett O'Hara... offer students a chance to express their thoughts, to define and reflect on them, to challenge each other's opinions, and to explore a new meaning discovered in a text...Informal classroom role-playing encourages students to think quickly and critically about literary characters, important social issues, or real problems facing people today or yesterday."
(p. 11-12)

Finally, in the **Visual and Performing Arts Framework**, the discipline of **Theater** allows students to learn through multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1993):

"...All students in California elementary schools need to be engaged in appropriate classroom theater experiences in their regular classrooms. Theater in the elementary school typically includes creative dramatics, improvisation, pantomime, storytelling, and the acting out of stories...All children should have the opportunity to participate in creative drama

activities for their intrinsic value and for their value as a process through which the students may learn about other subjects..." (p. 73-74)

RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, I would recommend that all administrators and district office personnel seriously concerned about literacy for children focus on the importance of meaningful student learning through strategies like creative drama. It is a process difficult to support with significant research, or assess with any standardized tool, but shows potential as a way to connect students to content that often has no meaning to them.

More research needs to be done in the area of creative drama, either in support of, or in opposition to its practice. Educators need guidance in implementing new strategies, and there is little data to support what could be an extremely effective process.

Educators should not be afraid to try creative drama, as they have always known drama to be effective in motivating students to understand character, plot, sequence, etc., in literature; to extend learning through personal relevance internalizes not only the content, but also the underlying themes and implications for each student. Through the understanding of the common themes, students can see themselves more clearly, develop self-confidence, and possibly improve their outlook on life and their attitudes toward others.

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